



GINA FERRAZZI Los Angeles

GABRIEL FERNANDEZ REMEMBERED

Sandra and Robert Fernandez attend the memorial service Wednesday for their grandson Gabriel Fernandez, 8, at Church of the Foothills in Sylmar. Gabriel's mother and her boyfriend have been charged with murder and torture in his death and four social workers with the Department of Children and Family Services have been placed on desk duty over the handling of his case.

WED 6-12-13

County *LA Times* severs ties to foster agency

By GARRETT THEROLF

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to cancel its decades-long relationship with a foster care contractor amid allegations of financial mismanagement and child abuse at the hands of staff and foster parents.

The move came after weeks of closed-door debates about the fate of Teens Happy Homes following a Times investigation outlining the agency's problematic history.

Supervisors Gloria Molina and Michael D. Antonovich had pushed to end the contract, saying many children there were living under unsafe conditions. But they struggled to get a third supervisor's support. At its Tuesday meeting, the board unanimously canceled the contract without comment.

The decision removes a troubled player from the county's foster care network. But it also puts further stress on a system struggling to find families willing to take in children. Officials hope that most of Teens' children can remain with

[See Foster agency, A9]

Move could further stress foster system

[Foster agency, from A1] their current parents under a new foster care provider, but they worry some may drop out.

Between 2008 and 2011, the county had 1,154 children living in a group home and foster family homes overseen by Teens, and it paid the agency up to \$3.6 million annually.

Over the same period, 240 allegations of abuse or neglect were filed on behalf of youths at those homes, a Times analysis of child abuse hotline data found. Teens' rate of nearly two allegations for each home was more than twice the average for foster care providers across the state.

Under the terms of the decision, the county will give Teens a 90-day notice that its contract is being terminated. The contract allows the county to cancel without having to explain why or face a penalty, officials said.

County supervisors Tuesday ordered the Department of Children and Family Services to help Teens' foster parents try to seek licenses directly from the state or connect with other foster care contractors so children now in their care can remain so, if the homes are deemed safe.

Teens' Chief Executive Beautina Robinson and the agency's attorney did not respond to a request for comment.

Many child welfare advocates applauded the county's decision and said they suspected that the true rate of abuse at many foster care agencies is higher than reported because victims fail to disclose incidents out of fear of retaliation.

Fiona Gonsier, a member of the Santa Monica Disabilities Commission, said she had counseled a young woman who experienced sexual abuse in a Teens home but

declined to file a complaint out of fear that her younger brother, a current Teens foster child, would be harmed.

"She told me horrific accounts of what happened to her," Gonsier said.

In recent years, one child died in the care of a foster parent chosen by Teens despite a severe abuse history documented through state records. Other examinations by auditors suggested Teens' chief executive had improperly enriched herself with money intended for abused children. And a foster youth deemed "credible" by authorities said Teens' staff regularly placated youths with drugs and alcohol.

That complainant, Jeff Castillo, said he underwent a thorough and skeptical interview by county investigators after his account of severe beatings appeared in The Times. DCFS Director Philip Browning sub-



ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

"TRYING TO tell this story made it difficult for me to hold myself together," said Jeff Castillo, who told of severe beatings in Teens Happy Homes foster care.

sequently said he determined that Castillo was telling the truth.

"I am a full-grown man now, but trying to tell this story made it difficult for me

to hold myself together," Castillo said.

Some allegations of financial wrongdoing had been known for years by the county's auditor-controller.

At a recent board meeting, the auditor-controller apologized for not having informed county supervisors of the specifics until The Times' report.

Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey is evaluating whether to press criminal charges in the case, a spokeswoman said last week.

As supervisors acted to end the contract with Teens, their lawyers have denied a Times public records request for supporting documents related to a recent audit of Teens' finances. A summary of the audit shows it includes information about a top official at another foster care contractor who accepted \$19,000 from Teens even though auditors found no evidence that any work was performed.

County lawyers said some of the records were exempt from disclosure under a provision of the law that allows information involved in a criminal investigation to be sealed. They also cited a law that requires the county to balance whether the public interest would be best served by disclosure.

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Residents answer plea for local foster parents

Thur 6-13-13 Breeze

By Nick Green

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An unprecedented plea for more foster homes in Torrance has generated an "overwhelming" response, and now officials have set an informational meeting Monday for prospective foster parents.

Hosted by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, the event will be held from 6-8 p.m. in the meeting room at the Katy Geissert Civic Center Library, 3301 Torrance Blvd.

The meeting was scheduled in the wake of a recent Daily Breeze article that outlined the critical need for foster parents in the community.

Officials with the county agency said about 60 percent of Torrance children removed from their homes for abuse or neglect within the past year were placed in foster homes outside the city because there were none locally that could house them. The remainder stay with relatives.

Local foster homes provide already vulnerable children with a degree of stability, allowing them to remain in their schools and other familiar en-

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Parents

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vironments, where they enjoy support from friends and teachers. But county officials mistakenly gave the newspaper an incorrect telephone number for prospective parents to call — it was actually a hotline to report potential abuse or neglect — and readers flooded it with inquiries.

"The manager at the child protective hotline said their boards were lit up for several days," said Rosa Tang, assistant regional administrator with the department's Torrance office. "There was such an overwhelming response to the cry for help."

Potential foster parents unable to make the meeting Monday can call 888-811-1121 — that's the correct number — or visit [HeartLA.org for more information.](http://www.ShareYour-</p>
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DCFS Regional Administrator Tedji Dessalegn and other agency representatives will speak for about 30 minutes at the meeting. The rest of the time will allow for potential foster or adoptive parents to meet individually with officials and exchange information.

"The department's heart gallery will be there," Tang said. "The heart gallery is a gallery of children who are available for adoption."

The meeting is the first step of what is usually a four-to six-month process to become a foster parent, which includes a training program and background checks.

The local DCFS office has partnered with the Torrance Council of PTAs to find at least 30 foster homes, one for every school in the community.

Cindy Shields, vice pres-

ident for community concerns with the council, initiated the partnership last year when she set about donating dresses and gowns once worn by her now college-age daughter.

After hearing a speaker tell a local church gathering about the dire need for foster parents, she ended up donating the clothes to a DCFS teen pageant; the winner wore her daughter's former prom dress.

During the holidays the PTA council collected toys, gift baskets and more than 100 gift cards for foster children. Now it has created a foster care-outreach position to coordinate the drive for more foster homes among its 30 member PTA groups.

"I am thrilled beyond words to see light shed on the serious needs of the tender, vulnerable kids who find themselves in need of foster

care," Shields said. "Our hope is to spread the word as needs arise — they can happen quickly and urgently — and to put the needs of foster kids on everyone's radar."

Torrance Councilman Pat Furey, who works at the Torrance DCFS office providing legal counsel to social workers and helped facilitate the partnership between the PTA council and the county agency, said it's hoped this targeted foster parent recruitment effort will become a pilot program for other communities where the need is just as great.

"The biggest hope is we can roll this out regionally, if not countywide," he said. "All of a sudden we realize there is a void. I think the community was as shocked as we were when we looked at the numbers. The community has really expressed a concern and is stepping forward."

OPIN

EDITORIALS

First the jails, now foster care

A strong commission might be the last, best hope for DCFS. It could ensure the supervisors' legacy.

LOS ANGELES County Supervisors Gloria Molina, Zev Yaroslavsky and Michael D. Antonovich will be termed out of office next year. Don Knabe will follow two years later. They will leave to their successors the twin challenges they have faced during their tenure: How to break a cycle of injustice and dysfunction to meet the human needs of society's castoffs — the poor, the addicted, the imprisoned, the homeless. And how to reshape county government to meet those needs efficiently and wisely, and to be sure they are solving problems and not exacerbating them.

These are perhaps the most onerous tasks in government. The current supervisors have sometimes risen to the challenge, and sometimes fallen short.

One of their best gifts to the people of the county and to their successors was the extraordinary Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence that was convened and that did its work last year. Say what you will about how long it took the board to muster the political will to face this task and to give up a measure of its power and resources to the panel, the bottom line is that it did it. As a result, a controversial undersheriff and four other top members of the Sheriff's Department brass were forced out. Management has been restructured. There is a new use-of-force manual. It's too early to say whether the commission has accomplished all that was intended, but there is a new sense that the department is finally being compelled to make long-needed changes.

Good for the supervisors. But their jobs are not over yet. The death last month of 8-year-old Gabriel Fernandez after repeated warning signs were missed by child welfare workers in the Department of Children and Family Services was merely the latest reminder of the dysfunction that has long defined that troubled department.

Can anything be done? There have been so many investigations, reports and reorganizations over the years that have come to nothing. The department has had 17 permanent or temporary directors in the last 25 years. There is a Commission for Children and Families, a Children's Special Investiga-

tive Unit, an Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect. There are task forces that report to the Board of Supervisors, panels that bypass the board, a chief executive officer who was placed over the department and then pushed aside. There have been audits. There have been lawsuits. There has been withering reporting from this newspaper and others about children who have been left in homes where they ultimately died, and other children who were taken improperly from their families.

The department seems paralyzed by too many moving parts, too many individuals and agencies at war with one another, pressing their own agendas or ideologies, jockeying for power rather than working for the well-being of children. Every time there is a news story, managers and child welfare workers turn their attention away from their work to respond, to cooperate, to stonewall, to defend themselves. One social worker describes the situation as being like a mechanic trying to figure out what's wrong with a customer's car while the customer is standing over her screaming "Just fix it! Just fix it!"

But there is something more the Board of Supervisors could do. Members could relinquish the ideologies, the jealousies, the loyalties that have resulted until now in changes in dribs and drabs. They could convene a commission with sweeping investigative power over the department, modeled on the jails commission, and give it the time, the money, the authority and the political back-up it needs to probe and recommend an overhaul of the department. Such a commission would need to set clear goals and would have to be assured of the full cooperation of the department if it is to cut through the dozens of stacked-up reports, Band-Aids and layers of oversight that the supervisors have amassed over the decades.

It is not clear whether the experience of the jails commission can be repeated. But Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas has proposed trying, and his colleagues will take up his motion in the next week or two. It is scary — because of the size of the task it would take on and because of the hundreds of ways in which a process of this type could go wrong. But the alternative is scarier, and it's an alternative that the county and its people have been living with for decades. The supervisors should see this as the last, best and final opportunity to leave behind a county child welfare system that works, or at least one that is on the road to improvement.